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August 14th, 2015 – Sister Delouise Menges speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana.

Abbreviations

SDM: Sister Delouise Menges

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon

MEL: My name is Mary Ellen Lennon and it is August 14, 2015 in Oldenburg, Indiana at the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Francis. I am sitting with Sister Delouise Menges, and I'm very happy to be sharing a conversation with her. Sister Delouise would you like to introduce yourself?

SDM: Yes. I'm Sister Delouise and people sometimes call me Sister Del because my name is a little more complicated than maybe what you would find in a traditional name. I, we were talking before about our, just, background and I think when I think about where I started, I'm originally from Cincinnati and I grew up in Westwood and my dad grew up in Westwood also and I think that probably what I am today is really a product of all that.

My dad was very devout Catholic and his family was. My mother was never Catholic. She studied to be Catholic, but she was kind of not satisfied with the whole thing of reconciliation, that sacrament. She could never get past that idea of telling her sins to a person. She had grown up believing you told your sins to God and God alone and she was from a little mining camp, town in West Virginia and when she went to Cincinnati that's really how her experience of city began. But my parents met before the war, but married after the war and so I grew up in Westwood. They settled in there and we lived in a house behind my grandparents' house and so I ended up going to the same school as my dad did and I think it was that background my dad had with the sisters that really cemented my relationship with the Sisters the Saint Francis.

When my dad was growing up, his dad had a very bad heart and therefore didn't work a whole lot. He had worked in a venetian blind factory, but my grandfather got his arm caught in a machine and as a result of that he was considered disabled, his his arm was injured in that accident and so as a young boy my dad did jobs to try to help support the family. I think my brother and I were talking about that the other day, we think dad was probably ten when he had his first job and so any money he brought in was a help and dad talked about the sisters and how he loved the sisters and they were like mothers to him. I talked about Sister Wilma. I think she must have been one of his maybe a 7th or 8th grade teacher and she had a sister at Saint Catherine's also, a blood sister named Sister Agrippina, but Sister Agrippina was an artist and so Sister Wilma was his teacher and Sister Agrippina of course was there too and he had a real devotion to both of those sisters, but here's why. They knew his family situation and Sister Wilma would say to him, "Stop over at the convent on your way home after school." And he would and she would have a package of meat for him to take home and you know these sisters I know they didn't have a whole lot, you know, I don't think sisters back then got a salary, they had a living situation and people provided things for them, but there was such a generosity there and he really felt that they were mothers to him I know he did and then he had a sister named Sister Crescentia who taught him 7th or 8th grade year and she stayed in contact with him even during the war and she

had some of her students write to him during the war and he had some letters that I saw when I was a child. I don't know where those letters are, but I think there was that relationship and even when I was a small child as soon as we got a car and it wasn't immediate, I don't know I was in grade school when we finally got a car, the sisters would call dad and ask, "Could you take one of our sisters to Oldenburg?" or "Pick somebody up at Oldenburg?" or "Take them to the doctor?" And dad would, you know, and we would go. The whole family went. I don't know how we fit in that car. But we all fit in there because I had a sister, I had two sisters at that time, my brother came along later, and my mother, and then this Sister.

And so, we went all kinds of places and we went to visit sisters, you know, Sister Wilma, Sister Crescentia, we went to visit them at different places where they were so we'd go to Dayton or we'd go downtown to Saint Joseph's or you know we go to Oldenburg during the summer or on a Sunday, dad would say, "Let's surprise Sister Crescentia and go see her." And she might be in New Albany, Indiana. And one time we arrived there and she wasn't, she was gone someplace and so we made that trip for nothing, really, but it was a beautiful sunny day and we just took a ride and went to visit and so I have all kinds of memories of seeing those sisters in the convent and they bring us a cold drink or you know and it was a little more, you know, it wasn't quite as relaxed as things are today about visiting, but we would sit in a parlor and visit with them and so I think growing up I saw those sisters and I wanted to be like them and I had those sisters, you know wonderful sisters like my first grade teacher was Sister Mary Omer and she was very energetic and my younger sister had her too and I had Sister Brendon who is now our sister Ruth Ann Boyle here. She was my second grade teacher, but she eventually went to New Guinea and spent years there and I had Sister Mary Claude and I had Sister Mary Otto. Okay, and for a principal I had Sister Angeline, she had at the end of my grade school years and I knew I wanted to be a sister. I think my family knew that too. I knew when I was young, but by the time I was six, seventh, eighth grade I knew that's what I wanted to do and I don't know that kids do they know that, that early, but I knew, but I was looking around for where to go. Where did I want to be a sister? And I didn't consider a community at first. I was looking, maybe, some kind of missionary group and so I saw these things in magazines, you know, like Catholic magazines and I wrote to these different communities. I just couldn't make up my mind and I knew that being a cloistered sister, I didn't think that was gonna work, but I really wanted to be a sister.

And Sister Angeline said to me she said, "You know, we have missions too." She didn't want me to rule out the Sisters of Saint Francis. And she said, "We have an aspirancy." Well I didn't know much about the aspirancy at all, but she said, you know, I should go down and I did go down. I think there was a vocation day and I came down with at that time our community, you know welcomed busloads of girls to come down on a Saturday and they'd put on a program and you know you could walk around and there was a test you know high school entrance test and so in my eighth grade year there were three or four of us from Saint Catherine's who came down and took that test. It was, I was, I still remember, it was a horrible day, rainy and cold and took the test and I really didn't think a whole lot more about it, but I did want to seriously still think about going and the results of the test came back and I won a scholarship.

Well, I really felt that was a sign. I felt like that I was really supposed to do this. And so I got in contact with the aspirancy and I went for an interview and I was accepted and so that's really how all this started. And it's kind of an interesting thing because I think probably a lot of people my age probably had a very similar story where they were taught by sisters and then they found out about this aspirancy and they went and I just remember, I think it was hard for my parents, you know, my mom though, you know in a lot of ways this is kind of miraculous, she didn't stand in my way even though this wasn't her faith, but she, you know, she'd go to church with us periodically, she knew what the Catholic faith was about and she was much stricter about it than I would be, like she wouldn't allow us to get things out of her purse at church, she did not, she'd come like SWAT at your hand if you go dig in your purse, nothing, no noise. She felt like people were praying you did not disturb people when they were praying, but she was really kind of welcoming of my my vocation and I think she knew I had a vocation, even though she had a sister who was 21 years older than her and her sister did not think she should let me go.

I was only thirteen, you know, why would she let me go down here and be away from home and mom said, "This is what she has to do." And so she let me come, but it's, some things are just crystal clear in my memory, coming down that first time to the aspirancy and the senior girl who met me at the door and took me around and kind of got me introduced to everything, it's all crystal clear.

MEL: Do you remember talking to your mother about it? Do you remember talking about your decision to go after you won the scholarship?

SDM: Yeah, I remember, maybe not so much exact words we said or anything like that, but they knew I wanted to go and you know there was never really any question about, "No you shouldn't" or you know "You better think this through some more" or whatever and I had an older sister who was in high school and she was at Mother of Mercy High School here in Cincinnati, which would have been the school I would have gone to also going from Saint Catherine's, but I don't know, I guess, I don't know if they just thought I was a little different or what the story was there, but they were totally accepting of it and they let me go and they knew I could come home at any time if I was not happy and when, while I was in the aspirancy my father wrote to me every day and it was really kind of an interesting thing because you know, what mail call everyday was you know we had two sisters that were kind of in charge of our group because we were rather large, there were 63 girls in our freshman class who were aspirants and so we had sisters who directed us from Carolyn FitzMeyer was the director of the aspirancy at that time and she had a helper, Sister Jane Fry was her helper from most of the time I was an aspirant and those sisters they shepherded us around I don't know how they took care of all those girls because that was just I don't know there were there had to be close to 200 of us I guess that we're in the aspirancy. That's a lot of people and then you think about taking care of them and we're away from home, you know, we're just kids really and you know all kinds of things can go wrong and you know there could be all kinds of behavior issues, we're living there, and they had to be sure that we did what we were supposed to do and that you know and they did they, they were, they were our mothers more than they intended to be, they had to be, they had to be there for us.

So we had a really wonderful life though. I would say, you know, I was really homesick. I probably didn't admit it to my parents because I didn't want them to worry, but I was really homesick and I think there was a period of time when I thought I don't know if I'm going to stay and I, you know, we got together our little group of friends and we kind of talked each other through our experience because we all were homesick, but we had really solid relationships with people, you know, and we bonded, we had really, really close relationships and I mean some of my classmates who are here now were aspirants with me. Like I don't know if you talk to any of these people but Sister Jerry Furman, she was a classmate of mine in the aspirancy, Sister Rosie Miller who's on her way to Springfield Illinois today for a new ministry. Sister Ann Vonder Meulen; she was one of my classmates. You know these are people that we knew each other from the beginning, you know, so you think about how long-term that was, we, we entered the aspirancy in 1963, so this has been a long, long relationship and it's a gift, it's a gift to have those people and to have spent those years nurturing a life together.

Barb Leonhard, Sister Barb Leonhard is one of my classmates and you know and then as, when we entered we picked up a few more you know, but we had a really solid group of people and obviously not all of us stayed, you know out of 63 people there's a handful of us that stayed, um, but it was a beginning, it was a beginning for us.

MEL: A community together? Like a long community, you were creating a community together?

SDM: Yes.

MEL: In the very beginning?

SDM: Yeah, it really was. And then I think just being here as a, in the high school, the Academy it's just a fantastic high school and the sisters that they were so professional and yet there was all that individual attention was given to people. It was a wonderful place to spend your high school years it really, really was and I remember at the end of that when we graduated, my class, we thought we were going to enter in, in February because that was the process at that time. You had like a three and a half year aspirancy, but then after Christmas she, there's, candidate, the aspirant stayed home and they got ready to enter in February and then they, they did that, but then they'd come over they were in the what the pot—what we call postulancy at that time, they were in that program of preparing to be sisters. Postulant means "asking" and so they were asking if this was the life for them and so they were kind of getting early trained in, but they were still high school students, so they came over for some classes, not for everything, but they had a few classes they had to continue on with and so they'd mix in with the Academy students and finished out their high school year and then they went through the graduation ceremony dressed as a postulant, which was really, really neat too. I mean when you look back on all that.

But my class, they decided that that wasn't going to happen anymore. The, the decision was made from the convent administration that we as aspirants from then on would finish out our high school year and then enter in September, September 8th was our, it is either

February 2nd for the aspirants or September 8th for everyone else and in a way we were kind of, we were glad, we were glad to be able to finish as a high school student. I think maybe, it was kind of bittersweet in a way, but a little disappointed because we were kind of anticipating that, but then we thought, No this is good, and then we graduated in our caps and gowns you know with everybody else, but we were aspirants, so we were a little distinct.

But I just remembered that graduation. I was so happy, but I was crying the whole time because I realized this is the end of this and it was a beautiful experience, it was just I think I did things as a high school student because I lived here, you know, it really was a community. I love the sisters I had Sister Mary Gloria Gallagher as my music teacher and I was in, I played an instrument, I played the accordion and I so I took lessons three years here in the music department, but I also was in what was called a quad trio at that time, a singing group and we went on to state competitions and we always got a first-place ribbon. It was just a wonderful experience to be with those other girls and to do something like that.

I was in sodality, the aspirants had their own branch of that. As a senior I was the, I was head of that, of that sodality. And I was, I had all kinds of involvements, I was on the newspaper staff and just all kinds of things that I don't know that I would have done if I had not been here and been in that, but I think when it was time to move on I was ready. I was excited about entering the convent and you know I went through a process here of you know and we were in a period of transition, the habit was going away it was being modified and so as postulants we came in with a modified outfit, we had a short navy blue outfit with a veil and just in that veil and then I, when we became novices we had the long, we did have the long habit, but by the Easter, we got that in August, and by the Easter I guess April of that year we were in an experimental group with a modified habit and it was, it was pretty, pretty interesting you know going into that.

And then from there on our group was chosen to go on to Marian University for one year for preparation and we were all excited about that because after that that we would actually have that experience and during my novitiate time I taught religion classes at a little town close by here, Osgood, and I got an opportunity to teach, I taught for a whole semester there because they had sisters who came on Sunday morning and taught religion classes and then they needed people to do a summer program and I got asked to do that and so I was really excited about doing that and in some ways it kind of took you away for a part of the day so that was kind of interesting and we had people that taught it in Muscatatuck, in that state mental hospital, taught, really worked with mainly with Down Syndrome people, so they had that kind of experience of just you know not everybody did it, some people didn't want to do that and they, nobody was forced to do it, but you know you were asked and if you were willing you got a chance to actually do that, so it was really kind of an interesting experience of doing a little bit.

And then of course made that year at Marian and I don't know that year was kind of a difficult year for me. I don't know what it was about it, it was a pretty intense program I guess because we we came from here we were taking class the whole time over here so we didn't go empty-handed to Marian, but then we were set up to go to certain classes, but I think it was just a difficult thing because you were trying to be a student you had all these responsibilities as a—we were called scholastics then because we were students in the convent, but we had a director and I don't know, I think part of it was we were kind of, we

wanted to get out on mission, but we were there studying and I don't think we knew how important it was that we're getting those classes. I think that was part of the problem, we didn't know how important that really was and it really did pay off because when I went on to my first year of teaching, I had enough credits that I could get some kind of teaching license, you know, and that was good. I had the things I needed. I think we had to have 90 hours of credits, college credits, we had to have child psychology and we had to have children's literature and I had all that, so I was able to go ahead and get and they you know my transcript was there and the school office downtown could look at that and, so I've always had a teaching license even when I didn't have a degree, I had a teaching license, so I was, you know, that was, I was in good stead, but I think having that year at Marian made all that difference because they packed in those classes, we had 18 hours every time, we were just, we were packed in.

MEL: I'm curious about your prayer life during that difficult year because you had come from, you were embarking on such a change, you know, it was a transition. I'm curious if you wanted to talk about your prayer life?

SDM: I think it was probably a little rocky. I mean we did we were with the program we went we went to Mass, we were there for office and we had an opportunity to blend with those college professors, those, you know those people that were on a pedestal in our mind those you know because they were teaching all these people like Sister Mary Rose Stockton and Sister Mary, Sister Florence Marie who taught math and you know I think Sister Mary Carol was at college at that time in the history department and all these people that were just, they were just you know we had them up here you know they were on a cloud as far as we were concerned and we had a chance to eat meals with them three times a day, you know, so we were kind of put in with them and we felt a little, I don't know, I think I felt very small, you know during that year, but it was kind of, it was an interesting time and I think you know I think sometimes when you're kind of in the desert, which I think I felt like I was, all kinds of other things come out.

And one of the things we did that year was we had an opportunity to work at you know like Indiana Boys' School or the Girls' School and I worked at Indiana Boys' School, which it was a little scary you know because you'd go there and these boys were (unintelligible) very young age since they were hardened criminals and you know I've talked to my classes about that because I don't think they have any idea that where you grow up has something to do with how you turn out and I said to them you know some of these kids were from towns you know where crime was rampant like Gary, Indiana a lot kids in the Indiana Boys' School were from Gary, Indiana and I said, their dads were car thieves, their brothers were car thieves, dad was car thief, no wonder the kid was a car thief and you know and we had, it was very interesting to see, very simple sharing of faith made a difference with those boys and we had an opportunity to go and help with that. I did go to Indiana Girls' School one time. Those girls were surly, they were all, and I think they had hardened lives you know they were not like girls I grew up with, they didn't have, the same background the same opportunities, but I think I was put in that and I think that did influence my prayer life in a way because I saw that it wasn't all as rosy as I had an opportunity to experience it, that people struggled, and I didn't see the struggle, you know, in the same way as far as faith goes or morals go you know I grew up in a really solid, my parents were, they were parents, you know, they were people that were there for you, they were nurturing and loving and not

every kid had that opportunity and I think that Boys' School experience probably brought that to my mind very much so.

Now after my time at Marian you know then we were out on mission, we got our first mission experience really and we have had a couple of weeks as novices, well even as a postulant, where we were sent out and that was kind of an interesting thing. As a postulant I was sent to Saint Mary's in Middletown and I was there to experience mission life and to see what teaching was like, so I was, I was only in the convent about four or five months when I was sent out and we all were we were all sent someplace and I kept a diary of my experience. I still have it and I think our idea I think all of us were intending to kind of keep a diary, but I wanted to be sure I, I knew and kept track of what that was really like to be there and it was interesting, the sisters there were wonderful just wonderful, but they worked hard and you also saw that there were some struggles in community living. It wasn't just all easy and there were some young sisters there who were trying to get an education, continue their education and also teach, so you saw all that and you know, it's, the house contained sisters that, there were a couple of retired sisters that were there and they kept house and they you know they did the cooking and things like that, but that was really an interesting thing because we were brought into the classroom then and had a chance to talk to the children. The children could ask us questions about what it was like to be in the convent you know so you got a chance to kind of share that with them.

And then as a novice, a second year novice, we were sent out I went to Saint Christopher's in Indianapolis and that was interesting too because at that point the sisters were kind of in a transition about habit and I don't know, I just sensed that they were still trying to find their place with what the world was asking of them, but also what they knew they should be as sisters. So you saw all this interaction going on. But that, I don't think I kept a diary at that time, which I wish I had now, but I had you know just those sisters they meant a lot to me because I felt like I connected with them, you know, and one of the sisters that was at Middletown with me ended up living with me. Sister Virginia Marie Kluemper who is a relative of Sister Ruth Kluemper who is here. They know that they're cousins of some way or other, but the Sister Virginia Marie was such a help to me, when I was on mission, when I actually was on mission because she was just calm. She handled everything in just a very calm peaceful way and it helped me when I was not calm, but I started out my work there and I wasn't necessarily calm.

But my first mission experience was at Our Lady of Victory in Cincinnati and you know we had nothing to do with, we had nothing to do with being placed there, we got a little slip that told us where we were going. And so we were still of that era at that time when it wasn't our choice, it was totally an obedience and we were so excited, so excited about going there and my parents were delighted because first of all I would be in Cincinnati, but also my dad was a letter carrier and he delivered mail in the Delhi area, so he knew that parish he delivered mail in some of the streets there were adjacent to Our Lady of Victory and so going to Our Lady of Victory was kind of an experience. There were, I think at that time there were 14 sisters living in that house, the school was big, it was over 1,200 students, and it was only grades 3 to 8. They didn't have room for anybody else and so it was interesting and I was assigned grade 3 and I thought at first I don't know if I'm gonna be able to do that, I don't even know if I like children, I don't know why I thought that, but I don't think I had a lot of experience with little kids.

When I was in high school our principal at Saint Catherine's wanted me to have some experience with teaching and so she got me involved in the summer, I guess it was almost like a Bible School program for little kids at Saint Catherine's and so for like the two weeks or whatever that they did that I helped in a classroom and I didn't especially like it. I don't know what it was about it, but I had to show up and I guess assist I never did any real teaching, but I assisted with crafts and all the other things that they did and I lived close enough at that time to walk there and walk back, so I did that for a couple of years and I know that as an aspirant during summer I went to Mass every day, either I, my aunt dropped me off at church or my dad dropped me off, or I walked, and we lived close enough that we could do that. So, but, in this whole teaching thing, I thought, How is this going to work out? Well two sisters in the house taught third grade also, I think there might have been five third grades in that school and that was the first year they were actually in our school, so it was, and it was also First Communion year for those students and so I had to kind of learn on the spot. We had had some methods courses at Marian during the summer, but I have to say a methods course is a lot different than teaching and you can talk about how to do something, but when you're actually there doing it, it's a whole different ballgame, and so the sisters, those sisters, it was Sister Ruth Kluemper was one of those sisters who was there and Sister Louise Ann Rossi who is no longer alive, those two were they were kind of like my mentors, they were there to answer my questions, to help me, I didn't really know a whole lot about doing a lesson plan, I had a little bit of practice from those classes, but it's just it's a whole different thing.

So anyway, I don't know, I was always in to getting my room ready and having everything. I loved teaching, I really did love it, and I had a wonderful principal, you know just, just who saw me through all of that and her name was Sister Rosita and she just died a few years ago too. Just a wonderful lady. I, I don't know I don't know where I would have been without her. She was very nurturing. She always looked out for me and I think she knew I was kind of young and kind of thrown in there and she made all the difference in the world and I remember her coming into my classroom and just sitting down, that's the way she would come in to see how things were going, she come and sit down in a student's desk and I would be teaching and she'd get involved. She'd get involved in answering and teaching and of course you know everybody's nervous when somebody comes in to watch you and of course as a young teacher like that I was I was nervous and anyway she told me that, she said, you're fine. She said, I think you're a natural teacher.

That's what she told me and I taught third grade for three years, but then I felt like I just want to be doing something else. I just feel like I need more mental stimulation. I like the kids, but I had some odd experiences. Like I taught in my first three years of teaching third grade I taught in the basement of a church. We had an old church building and then and there were some Masses there, but the parish was too big. They had outgrown that, the building was over 100 years old, but there were three classrooms down there. We had two third grade classrooms and then we had an art room down there and it was a basement and the carpet. There was an indoor/outdoor carpet down there and if it rained the rain came in under the door that led down to them, so the carpet was damp. So you turn on the lights in the morning and you'd hear this skittering. These water bugs would be running across the carpet.

A child brought a pumpkin, a carved pumpkin in for Halloween and I thought it was wonderful. We put it on a little table and it looked nice and it was nice for a couple days

but because of the dampness we came in one morning and it was a pool of pumpkin, it was just all deteriorated because it was just too went down there and we had one window and it had an air conditioner unit in it and that was our window to the world, but we were underground, you know, but it was an interesting experience, but I hit a boy, this is a really funny experience we went out we went out for recess outside of the building. So we'd go up the back steps and go outside by the back of church and they would play out there. Well this boy was just a real handful and one day he came in without, without a shoe. I said—I still remember the boy's name, isn't that funny. I said, "Where is your shoe?" He said, "A crow took it away." I said, "No, that can't be." He said, "Yeah," he said, "a crow came down and picked it up and took it away." We never did find that shoe. I don't know if a crow took it, I don't know if the kid ate it. I really have no idea what happened to that shoe, but he never had that shoe on his foot and uh I'm sure his mother had to wonder what on earth happened, when he came home with one shoe.

But I told you that my dad was a letter carrier and I said to him—I taught letter writing. I said, "I wish there was something we could do that would incorporate something with that. He said, "How about if I come and visit your class?" And so we worked this out. It was a really kind of a neat thing where he was going to come and see them, but we were going to write a letter to him inviting him to come to our class and so that's what we did and the kids didn't know he was my dad. So when we were just going to write and we've got, we've got the name of this letter carrier, wrote to him. And he sent us back a special delivery letter saying that he would be there to see us and so then he came to the class and he talked to them about the importance of letter writing and what happens with the letter and you know they saw part of the process with this special delivery letter and then at the end we told, we told the class that he was my dad, but it was a wonderful experience because first of all dad was just, he was just in his glory and he was there in his letter carrier outfit and the kids got a chance to kind of meet somebody up close that did that kind of service. Such a vital service then, I don't know if today kids think letter writing is that important, but it was so vital then. And so it was a wonderful thing.

And in my early years, I, I have a brother who's 12 years younger than I am and he would come and help me decorate my room and so he was, he was just a kid you know, but he loved that and you might not think a boy would love that, but he would come and spend a day and our, we had a cook at Our Lady of Victory, Sister Connor Dean. And she's no longer with us either, but she was a wonderful person and just she was from Evansville and grew up on a farm and that was what she did, she cooked and I think she was one of these delayed vocations. She was in her 20's before she decided she was gonna become a sister and I think she said her brothers and sisters called her "cotton-top" because she had really white blonde hair and she talked about how you the boys would "the boys" she always referred to her brothers as the boys. They'd come in from working on the farm and of course their big meal was lunch and she said they'd have fresh baked bread. And she said those boys would tear into those loaves they would just tear them apart they were just everything was so delicious, but she, she was a wonderful cook. She baked she, awe, she did everything. And when my brother would come to help me it was a highlight to come over at lunch and have lunch and she would always have something baked, you know what I mean, she would have homemade cookies or something it was always a treat and um, but it was a treat having him there too because it was so much fun and I had him as to come over and help me with my room.

But I spent thirteen years at Our Lady of Victory and you know like I said, it was a period of transition, our community was in a government kind of change. We went from having superiors to having what we call shared responsibility, so my first year there I'd never had a superior. I had, Sister Rosita, was not a Superior anymore, but I think was hard for the sisters because they were used to having a Superior and the older sisters looked to her to make decisions even when it came to things like voting, which you might find kind of odd. They relied on her to help, like who would be a candidate to vote for, you know, because I think it was probably something that was talked over you know and the Superior's view was considered very important and now they had to kind of do a lot of things for themselves and shared responsibilities wasn't easy for everyone at first, you'd think having that freedom to make a lot of decisions on your own and all that, it really required other things out of us like we had a lot of House meetings and people were expected to share their thoughts and feelings and I remember people crying. It wasn't easy for everyone to do that you know to have to speak and lead a house meeting and things like that, that wasn't easy, we kind of had to learn on the spot how to open up to all those different, new ways of living and it was, it was a lot more freedom in all of it, but you had to learn how to live that freedom, you know, you weren't used to that, you were used to kind of being directed.

MEL: Sister, you mentioned you lived for those thirteen years in a house with other sisters and you were, you were a young sister at this time of transition with many other sisters. I'm enjoying hearing about how, I would enjoy to hear more about how you felt at that time because you didn't have 30 years before in another way, right? So could you talk about that time and how you were seeing other sisters struggle maybe with changes and how did you feel about all of that?

SDM: You know we had an age range in that house during the times I lived there, you know, I was the youngest person I was only 20 years old when I started teaching you know and so I was the youngest person there and I remember that very first summer we had a priest come in to lead like a retreat, a house retreat for us and I, you know, I was kind of like, they called me like the little Benjamin in the house, I guess, as a biblical reference because I want say youngest one there in a lot of ways it was kind of intimidating because you had these people who, this was, you know they'd done all this teaching all their life and these elderly sisters and everyone was very, very I would say very very kind to me my experience was not anybody trying to dominate or tell me what to do or whatever, they were open to my questions people were willing to give me advice on things I needed, I know that there were differences of opinion about how things should be done, you know, like for example, I remember one of the younger sisters moving furniture around in the house where she was she was doing the cleaning and that wasn't necessarily appreciate about everybody that should of have been a house decision you know and she, she didn't think anything of it. She just thought, "I'll clean this room, I'll make it look nicer, I'll just rearrange this." Well not everybody thought that was a good idea and you know you had to be very sensitive you really did it because not not everybody saw things the same way and I think that was one of the, one of the things that it was hard, but it was really something that you needed to consider because we came from different time periods.

And we did have some times as time went on, not initially, but as time went on, we had sisters who live with us, who were viewed to be a little bit more radical, you know, and we were allowed to at first you know we had a standard dress of you know, a blouse with a

certain kind of certain collar styles were permitted and you know all this kind of thing we did have a veil at first, but we had times when we were allowed to wear casual attire and some people were more casual than others and not everyone appreciated that and there were comments that were made some times and you know that those comments could hurt people's feelings you know you just had to learn how to take some of that and you know not let it affect you I think and realize that everyone has a right to her opinion but at the same time we had to let everyone be who she was and I think that's always been the challenge of community, you know, because there are things that we need to do together as Sisters of Saint Francis and its religious women, but we're also persons you know with our own individual thing and I think I've seen more that as we've grown as a community I've seen more that openness I think there were times when I remember even as a postulant a novice when there were few sisters who came to the mother house you know for meetings or whatever and they come with like sandals on, that was not appreciated, you know that was not proper shoes and it was talked, you know, you heard little, little talking about it.

Now, who'd think anything of that? Who'd think anything of it? And when I come down here for meetings and I see people very casual at these meetings, very casual, nobody thinks a thing of it. We don't care what you're wearing, we don't care what kind of shoes you have on. You know, I just think that it was part of our growing, it was growing out of that box that we were in as religious women to really be the humans that we were to, to be the women that we were and I think it's so refreshing today to see how we've grown and to feel I feel much more myself now than I probably did my first entered, I felt like, you know, I wanted to be everything a sister was, I really did, I wanted to be all of it and I was delighted about the habit. I was so excited about it, but as the time changed I was I was okay about changing. I know it was very difficult for my dad, he did not like it at all because when I first entered, you know, we we still had a very long traditional habit, we didn't have the habit that he knew, you know and this was an interesting thing, when I first went to grade school my sister was a year ahead of me and dad thought that Saint Catherine's had a different kind of sister because they had just changed their habits still long, but it didn't have all that working around it, all that gimp kind of thing and he thought they were no longer Sisters of Saint Francis. What's the, what kind of sisters were these? And he found out they were the same sisters, but you know with that modification in the habit and then when I was a novice is when we changed to the shorter habit and dad did not like it. In fact, I didn't even tell him we were going to be in this and we had an opportunity for a home visit and in our second year novitiate year and we were going at Easter time and I think we just had a couple of days and he was gonna pick us, pick me up after I think it was after dinner at Easter and he came, he was not happy and I remember crying because dad was so upset about it and I thought going home, "Aren't you happy to see me?" And he was so upset about the habit and we worked it out and in the course of me being home we worked it out, but he was so disappointed that we had given up something that he thought was so vital to being a sister.

And you know, it is, as time goes on, I think more and more people are realizing it's not that vital, you know, it's who you are, you still come through, I think a lot of people know I'm a sister even if they don't see a habit. Here's a weird thing, which I don't know if this should be in my autobiography in a way, but I visited with a medium and this lady is Catholic and very religious, but she does have a special gift and I know not everybody would agree that mediums have it and she's not a predictor of the future kind of thing, but she's somebody that has a sense of you and I didn't tell her anything about my background you know in fact somebody else whom I know well who knew her and had had an experience with her made

the arrangement, made the appointment for me and in the midst of this reading that she did she said to me she said, "You know," one of the things she told me she said, "You have a lot of spiritual protection, I want to tell you that, you have a lot of spiritual protection." I said, "You know, I sense that, I know that I do." She said, "You know, you're somebody who could have been a nun." She said, "You just, there's something about you that you could have, you could have been a nun." And it's interesting because a priest I know who went to her, she knew he was a priest, she just had that sense about him and there was nothing in the way he was dressed that would said that, but I feel that with the children I teach they know, they know I'm not, I'm not something other than who I am, they know I'm a sister.

And I think that's something we can give to the world. I don't know, it's part of the, it's part of our vocation to be and I think who we are comes through. I had kind of a singular experience in a way in the fact that even though this is my 45th year of teaching, this is only the second place I've ever taught. I taught for 13 years at Our Lady of Victory and this is the 32nd year I've been at Saint Veronica and it's just been a really wonderful thing. I you know most of my years I think I said I taught three years third grade then I was, Sister Rosita moved me up to sixth grade, which I was very happy about and then she left because she was elected as at that time Assistant Mother of our community and I had kind of a hard year after she left. It was such a difference going from third grade to sixth grade. I wasn't prepared for that. I really was not prepared for it and I had a class were it was kind of like a little criminal group. I say that they were just different. They were harder you know third graders they love everyone you know they really do. Sixth graders weren't like that and we had very large classes, we had like forty kids in a group and there were five rooms of them, so you can see we had a big group and there was one boy in the class that stole one of the other teacher's purses and Our Lady of Victory has a cemetery. That purse was found out in the cemetery, so, you know, we had some difficult students that year, but I kind of weathered the storm and I mention Sister Virginia Marie, she really talked me through that year, when I was upset about things, she talked me through and I was able to kind of get a solid footing and I was able to go on from there, I was okay.

And then I got moved to seventh grade and I taught seventh grade ever since, the whole time I've been at Saint Veronica I've taught seventh grade. And I've been in the same classroom there. I mean it's really kind of an interesting thing because I feel like I'm part of that what that place is. The school opened in 1975 and I went, came there in 1984 so I've been there for a lot of the history of that building and then and what that place is and it's been very, very good, very good. I think as the years go by, I found greater strength, well I'm a literature teacher, but I've become more of a religion teacher. I don't know, I find that just blending in with just about everything I do with everything I teach and I'm constantly trying to get the kids to understand that we're just pilgrims walking through this world and that we're on our way someplace else and we need to know that, we need to know that, we can't be holding on to everything here, and I think there have been a lot of things in my experience, I don't know, there was a really wonderful article that in NCR that came out this summer about the transfiguration and I don't get NCR, but I have a friend who does and gave me a copy I guess it must have been on online in the anticipation of the Feast of the Transfiguration and it talked about Thomas Merton and how he had that experience of being in, was it Louisville or Lexington, I guess it was Louisville, where he was walking around and it dawned on him that we're all walking around shining like the Sun, but we don't know it, we don't know what we are. And this article brought that out again and how this

writer had had that experience of looking out and saying you know Ohio, heaven, Ohio. And that this is, this is it. We're already there.

We just don't know it and if we knew it, what a difference that would make and I thought, I've got to get that across to my kids, I've got to get that across to them. I think that's gonna make a difference for their life if you know that because I think we get so hung up on the little everyday things and I think that's what that's the difference I want to make. It really is the difference I want to make. Is not, not to let those little every day this, this is what we have to live, but it's our pathway, it's our pathway to something that's so much bigger if we could only see it, if we can only see it, so that's, if I had to say what would be my goal for teaching it is that. I want the kids to know, I want them to know God, I want them to have that personal relationship, which I don't know that they understand yet, but seventh graders begin to get a hint of things. They begin to get concepts, they don't have it before then they don't have the capability and now they, they begin to get, I've seen that happen with kids when we talk about heaven where all of a sudden it's like their eyes pop open. I don't think they are things they have ever thought about before or have a concept of, but they're beginning to have that ability and I think if you can kind of snag them early, there's a possibility that they can take that with them, you know, and I that's, that's my hope.

MEL: Sister, in imparting that to them, it's amazing, but how, is there a particular literature you use, or is it, every day that you say these things or how, how do you use your lesson plans to somehow introduce them to these beautiful concepts?

SDM: Well I think there's a lot that comes out thematically in literature that you can use, so I try to, I really try to incorporate that in as many ways that I can to try to get them thinking a different level with it, so when we kind of begin to look at the theme you know looking at like with my accelerated group we do the Diary of Anne Frank and I think that girl has such a spiritual side to her and to think how young she was and yet we can use that use that, use that to see because she taught us so much in her short life and you know how and I always like to think too because I've seen this in my life and the lives of people I know where God takes our dreams and he fulfills them and I thought that about, I said that to the kids about her dream to be a writer you know that's one thing she wanted and then she died so early, but look how God gave her everything she asked for, far beyond her imagination you know that she became a greater writer to the world than she ever would have been if she lived and I think that that's, I try to, I try to tie some of those things in.

We do a Holocaust study with both groups because they do, well first of all we study Judaism and I think it's so important for kids to understand that that's, that's embedded in the Jewish mind and heart, you know, to that struggle that struggle to live to be and so even with my group, my average track group kids too, we study that, we do that I don't know if you're familiar with "I am Rosemarie," but it's a, you know, because that is based on actual concentration camp experience and how people come out of that changed, but you know her image at the end of that is the butterfly and how important that really is, we're all, we're all in that transition we're all, there's something that's going to emerge in us and we don't know what it is, we really don't know what we're going to look like at the end, but I think that's where with Thomas Merton. I think he saw us like that, I try to look at my students that way, I really do try to look at them that way, and I'm gonna work on that more you know to try to see that light that's in there because it's there and I think if they could see it in each other we'd be a little kinder, we would not treat each other the way we treat each

other you know and I think it's hard. Junior high kids are, they're trying to find their place and sometimes they're not always nice to each other and we try to work with that. We try to we try to get them on a different plane different level with how they see each other and how they appreciate each other.

But it comes out in religion class too because I do a study of world religions and you know all of them all those world religions have some kind of concept of either afterlife or at least you know the spirit inside of a person that is valuable, you know that relationship in some way to something beyond themselves and we try to look at how all of them see that and it's really so enriching. I think the kids, the kids love it, you wouldn't might not think that they would, but they love learning about these different kind of, about Hinduism and you know the sacredness of the cow and you know how Gandhi saw things when you look at Gandhi and how you know how his whole principle of things and they quote Gandhi the rest of the year, they, they they really love his mentality and you know his idea that we're all one on the same, it's just you know I think there's so many ways that you really can incorporate life beyond here, you know, and I think they just need to understand the value of it.

I think we live in too material of a world. It's so hard for kids because everything in their life is about money and how do you get them to see differently? How do you? When their parents are bogged down in that I don't know I remember I taught a boy who went on from our school to Saint X[avier] and he came from a pretty well-to-do family you know they owned a big company, owned a big company in Cincinnati and his parents live in a very nice housing thing they owned a suite of apartments and they own a suite of apartments that are where they operate you know the offices for their business and so this boy was surrounded by luxury really, well I guess in this religion class Saint X where they're trying to talk about you know ministering to the poor and all that and it kind of plays with his mind you know and he gets this idea that we've got to do something different and he goes home and says you know we're too extravagant in the way we live and all I said you know his parents beat that down they say to him you know well don't you want, what about vacation? Well don't you want to go on vacations? Don't you want this? Don't you want that? And before you know it they've, they've shot down every new value that he's beginning to try to plant in there and I don't know how he ever came out of that because I really think he was beginning to think for himself and think there's something out here beyond this luxurious life that I've always lived, but his parents weren't helping him at all. Not at all and I don't think they ever could move out of their little you know circle that they earned that, they saw that they earned that and I think that is hard, it is hard for us living in a material world because that's the only thing people seem to value anymore.

And I don't know I think that's a challenge too with teaching you know how do we bring bring our Christian value, real Christian values to play in our lives and not just something that you talk about and then you see in church and they walk out with you on after Mass I mean it's hard.

MEL: I'm struck Sister how about you describing your first position teaching and how you didn't you were going to like being a teacher. Do you remember thinking about that ever? Because it's such a passion, it's your calling, it's your vocation, but you were uncertain at first it sounds like.

SDM: I think I was uncertain about little kids. I think that's where I was uncertain. I always wanted to be a teacher, I loved teaching, in fact and I think a lot of people who were teachers probably did this where they lined up their stuffed animals on their bed and had summer classes. I did that and my sisters and I, we all did it, but I think I probably was the instigator of that because I, I was determined. I wanted to teach and I had this stuffed rabbits and dogs and everything else and you know so, that's part of how we spent our summer, you know, so I knew I wanted to teach, but I think I always thought I'd teach older kids. And maybe high school, college. I don't know. And see even my initial thing was, you know I got a, you know a certificate for high school. I did the high school you know classes to you know to teach high school, but then I ended up starting out in a grade school and most of us did I mean all of us did even you know I don't know, do you know Sister Mary Claire Hausfeld? Well she taught a couple of years and she end up here in the kitchen, she was in the kitchen here for 40 years so you know she knew teaching wasn't for her, but we all started doing that, so I don't know I think I wasn't sure about little kids. I just wasn't sure if I could relate to them and I think I did okay, I think I did okay relating to them, but I just wasn't, I, I felt like I wasn't mentally challenged enough by the content. The content just kind of got to me after a while.

And luckily Sister Rosita listened to me and she allowed me to move out of that and gave me that place in sixth grade and the content was better and then with seventh grade I love it. I love it. And I think part of what I love about it is, first of all, I'm in a situation where I can you know work with different levels and I can like I can work with that advanced material and use that like, like my advanced group does 9th grade work so they'd use a high school textbook and I can challenge them and we work in all kind of, we do a lot of study of short story and we do mythology and we do, we do a unit on science fiction and we do a big unit on poetry and, and I can get them thinking in terms of things that they've never really thought about before so it's really a lot of fun that group really is a lot of fun and I and you know even with my average group we just do a whole span of literature that's so good and I've, I'm fine with where I am. I really feel like I understand the kids that age.

And that's why I had worked with a boy this summer, he was feeling unsure about coming back because he had only been there one year and he wasn't sure he fit in and so I met with him the summer, we arranged a time and I sat down and met with him and he said he felt comfortable meeting with me and we had a good talk and we did some role-playing so that he would, you know, if he, because he had a couple of kids that he felt like he wasn't relating to well, so we did a little thing of you know I was, I played his part he played the part of these other kids and then we reversed it and at the end he thought, he's going to be okay, he's going to be okay to come back and we had a little scheme a little plan that he could work out, so that when he came back in the fall he'd be alright. Well anyway his mother sent me an email thanking me for meeting with him and he said, he said, she said, "Phillip said you get him."

And I thought, That was kind of cute because I think I do understand kids this age and maybe it's because I've been exposed to them for so long. I kind of know how they think and I and I feel like I do understand them. Every once in a while you'll find one that's on a slightly different track, but for the most part they're just, they're kids, but they're kids on the verge of wanting all that independence and yet you know, they've got boundaries yet and they've got to live with that and they've got to find a way to enjoy life and they do, they, and you know you just try to nurture. You try to nurture a lot of things in them because there's a

lot of creativity that comes out in this age and there's a lot of independent thinking that if you can just push it along get them to express themselves they're wonderful with discussion. We can just have wonderful, religion class is one of the best places for that, you just get all kinds of—the more the more you open them up to that, the more they'll do it. And it's really good, it's really good.

MEL: I hear that word you keep using, they're on the verge of "transformation" and you're there to foster that.

SDM: Yeah, very much so. To foster that. And you know there's a lot you have to do with parents, yeah. And we have a back-to-school night. And we only have 20 minutes and I'm always running out of time. I never have enough time. And you know and I try to give them kind of a run-down of material, but I really want them to understand that you know for many of them this is, if this is their first kid in junior high, they need to understand where their child is, you know, and their kid still needs a lot of support, but you also have times that you have to step back and let them work it out, let them work it out, don't try to save them all the time, you know, let them find a way to work it out and I think that we do a lot of parenting of parents and I know that probably sounds silly, but parents, and there are a lot of parents who are very open to that who feel like they need somebody to kind of steer them a little bit and I've been doing it long enough I think maybe they trust me, but it is, it's a good thing, it's ah, I don't know, I'm very happy where I am.

And I look forward to another year to get that energy flowing again and you know and to find this new group this group I'm going to work with this year has a lot of kids who have learning issues and so we have an intervention team at our school that will work with some of them independently or they'll sit with them in the room while you're teaching so that if they need extra support they've got that person there sitting with them. So I'm going to see what this is like because it's more than, we always have a few, you know that's the nature of education, but I think this year it's a bigger number and we're going to see how this all works out, you know, especially with, we change class every 45 minutes so you know, kids have to be ready for that and it's a lot of adjustment, so it's going to be fun. I'm looking forward to it. I'm beyond my time.

MEL: No, no. I'll stop because I know about your luncheon and I want to say thank you. Let me shut it off.